

A CURIOUS LOVE STORY.

HE LEARNED A LESSON IN ETIQUETTE.

ONE of the most curious love stories I ever heard Uncle John told me. I give it verbatim, only omitting the names of the actors, since the story is true, and some of them may yet survive. In the autumn of 18— I was returning home from Tennessee, riding horseback, as was the fashion of young men in that day, and stopping for the night wherever I happened to be.

I was in — County, western North Carolina, the land of beauty and unwritten romance, and my road lay through the most beautiful country I ever saw. Such low lands and meadows! Why, they were the very El Dorado of cattle and stock-raisers. A sudden and violent storm drove me for refuge to the first house in sight, which proved to be that of General G—.

A splendid place it was, kept like an English lord's.

Such timber, such meadow lands, such wide stretches of cultivated fields! Why, it was a perfect picture. I never saw such a superb domain in all my life. The house, too, fairly matched the land in which it was set. It was a perfectly ideal home in all its appointments.

General G— was the soul of genial hospitality. A tall, handsome, courteous, and very scholarly man, fit lord for so fair a manor.

We seemed to take a mutual fancy to each other, and I stayed on from day to day until I had spent a month with him.

One night, over our walnuts and wine, I happened to be struck by the incongruity of such a beautiful home being only a bachelor's den, and looking up suddenly I said:

"How comes it, general, that so well-gilded a cage holds no singing-bird? Why don't you put a fair dame as mistress in this lovely house?"

A deep flush rose as swiftly as sheet lightning in his face, and he answered rather roughly:

"Do I look like a man that a fair woman could love?"

I looked him over critically. A tall, stalwart, well-preserved man of fifty-five or sixty, with a rather stormy, but very handsome face, every inch a man, and a gentleman—one who could be loved and well loved too. And I said quickly:

"I think you are a man who could both win and hold a lady's loving favor, if you cared to try."

He laughed harshly and then said:

"Do you? Then to prove the fallacy of a young man's opinion I'll tell you a story that I have never told to mortal ear except my father's."

"When I was a young man— younger than you are— I lived with my father across the road yonder, where my sister now lives."

"We two were my father's only children, and he never let us leave him. We were educated together by an English tutor—an Oxford graduate—and though I had never gone to college I was fairly well educated and had the tastes and habits of a gentleman."

"One summer, thirty years ago this year, our quiet was invaded by some consoling of my father's from the eastern part of the State, who brought with them a young lady who was a cousin of theirs. With their arrival a new life dawned for me. Laura, the young lady visiting with them, was the first unmarried woman of our own rank that I had ever known. She was a beautiful woman, and the sweetest, loveliest, most lovable creature in all of God's great universe."

"I fell in love with her at sight, and I am in love with her now. We were always together, riding, walking, boating, reading—all the time."

"I asked her to marry me without a fear of refusal—she seemed to be so absolutely a part of my life—and she accepted me as frankly. And I swear before Heaven I never doubted that our future lives were to be passed together."

"They returned to the low country in October, and I was to go down in April to be married."

"As soon as they left I began to build this house as a home for my wife; and every hour of my waking life was absorbed in the thought of her. I seemed to be so absorbed in the consciousness of her that I did not miss her actual presence."

"About four months after she left, one day my father said: 'Charles, when did you hear last from Laura?'"

"I—I don't understand you, sir," I answered stupidly enough.

"Why my question was very simple. When did you last hear from the woman who promised to marry you?"

"I have never heard from her, sir."

"Never heard from her! Why, what is the matter? Has she any foolish scruple against answering your letters?"

"I have never written to her, sir."

"Never written to her! Why, good heavens, my son, what do you mean?"

"Simply that I have never written to her, sir. I never thought of it."

"Do you dare to say that you have grown indifferent to that sweet young creature, and are trifling with the affections that you won? Do you no longer love her?"

"I love her! I broke forth. 'I worship her, sir!'"

"Then, why in Heaven's name did you not write to her?"

"I don't know, sir; except that I never thought of it; that is all I can say. But I swear I meant no slight or indifference. I love her as my own soul, and I have no wish in life apart from her."

any terms she gives. I doubt if you will have an easy job of it. How you can explain your silence to her so as to satisfy her pride and affection I don't see, but lose no time and do your best."

"These words put me into a perfect frenzy."

"In less than an hour I had started for the low country. I never spared either my horse or myself. I rode night and day, and at last reached Fayetteville one stormy night long after dark."

"Laura's home lay nearly a day's ride further on, but my horse and his rider were both worn out, and rest we must."

"When I went to register my name I saw Laura's name written just above, and upon inquiry found that she was accompanying her brother-in-law to Tennessee where they meant to make their future home. I at once sent a request that she would see me, which was refused. I sent another more urgent entreaty, and received another refusal."

"I then sent for the brother-in-law. He came, very cold and stiff, resenting what he called my treatment of his sister."

"I threw myself upon his mercy. I told him the exact truth. I could not explain how it happened that I never thought of writing, but I had never once thought of it. I loved her with all my soul, and had but one wish in life, and that was that she should marry me."

"He was completely won over to my side, and promised to use his influence in my behalf. He went off to see Laura, and after a long time came back, very much annoyed, and said:

"I can't do anything with her. She will see you if you insist, but she would much rather be spared the pain of meeting you—and frankly, I don't think it will do any good; but you can try."

"I insisted on seeing her. I would have fought my way to her, for it was a life and death matter to me."

"She came at once at the summons, cold, pale, changed, like an ice image of the lovely, tender, clinging young creature from whom I had parted."

"I seized her hands and poured forth my story of love and longing. She listened like a statue; and when I paused for a reply, she only said:

"Why did you not write to me?"

"I don't know. I—I never thought of it," I stammered awkwardly.

"And yet you say you love me! You let four months of unbroken silence stretch between you and the woman you had promised to be your wife in so short a time. And you can only account for such an unheard of thing by saying you never thought about writing and still you profess to love me!"

"I do love you. I have never ceased to love you, or to think of you for one conscious moment."

"And I—I can not believe you! No! Stop! Hear me out. I know I love you. I know the thought of you ran like a visible thread through every moment of my life. I know how I longed and agonized; how bitter was my disappointment; how deep my hurt; how keen my humiliation as days, weeks, months passed in utter silence, and at last your name dropped into my ears."

"My friends, hurt and indignant for me, were yet too kind to add to my anguish by words or questions. And because I know what love is I can not believe that you love me. I do not know why you have sought me and insisted on seeing me—I only know that my faith in you is dead, and I am worse than a widowed woman, for I have not even the memory of love to comfort me."

"She wrung her hands together once with such a hopeless gesture, and then stood still before me."

"I had nothing to say. What could I say? I had urged my only plea in vain, but at last I said:

"I can not defend, explain, or excuse my silence further than I have already done. I can only repeat before God as my witness that I love you with all my soul. Will you not try to believe me?"

"She looked at me with an agony of longing in her eyes. I knew she wanted to yield, and perhaps if I had dared to take her in my arms it might have been different; but I waited in absolute silence and at last she said:

"I can not believe you. Let me go!"

I stood aside, and held the door open for her to pass out, and she went out without one backward glance. And in less than five minutes I was in the saddle and on the road home."

"But you tried again?"

"No, I never did. I gave it up there and then. If you had seen her face and heard her voice you would have seen the uselessness of further effort. Father was very kind to me, but died in a few months, and I went straight to the dogs. I drank, swore, fought, gambled, and was all that was ruffianly for ten straight years; then I sobered down and went to work and finished building my house, and here I am. That was thirty years ago. I have never courted any other woman, or wished to put a mistress in my house. I built it for Laura. It is hers, or nobody's but mine."

"And you love her still?"

"I love her as dearly to-day as I did when I first kissed her soft cheek under the great chestnut-tree yonder the evening she promised to be my wife."

"But, Uncle John, did he really love her?"

"Oh, yes, dear; there is no doubt of that. I never saw a man show more genuine emotion. Why, he walked the floor like a caged lion, and his face was as white as a handkerchief. It was a curious story and he couldn't explain it himself, but he certainly loved her."

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